



Leaves, Lemons and Lockdown

By Uma Vangal

On January 30th as India observed the Mahatma's death anniversary, the first case of Corona Virus was reported. Three students returning from Wuhan had tested positive and the news barely registered as a cause for alarm. The media reported on the frenetic preparations for the state Visit of the Trumps and we went on with business as usual with classes and assignments at the Asian College of Journalism(ACJ), Chennai, India. March rolled around and suddenly the reports got serious. We were hearing of an outbreak, epidemic, epicentre, rising numbers of positive cases and death tolls in China, Iran, Italy and Europe.

My final class at the ACJ was on March 11th just as the Who declared the COVID-19 as a pandemic of International concern. I immediately decided to go into Self Isolation and take the advice of my children, living in San Jose and Paris respectively, who were urging me to prepare to hunker down for a long time. On a Monday, the Ides of March, I completed the final grading of my Elective course on “Cultures, Communication and Consumption” and called it a semester.

Thus began my tryst with myself and my neighbours for a month. Or so we thought at

that time. I read up all I could about the virus and symptoms and began advising family to take precautions. At the end of that week, India went on a nationwide lockdown after a day of a pilot “Janata Curfew.”

The ringing of bells and pots and pans on that Sunday night at 9 pm was the first act of solidarity that I took part in with my 406 neighbours. The next day, I took it upon myself to draw circles and boxes near our tiny grocery store with my stock of chalk and exhorting neighbours to please follow social distancing. Strange looks and few arguments on just needing one item were handled by using my 'teacher tone' and they soon fell in line.

A community initiative by our apartment resident's association to sanitise in traditional Indian style followed. Strings of neem leaves across our entrance archway by the security led to every household having a version of the grandmother's strategy to ward off the virus. Some of us had bunches of neem leaves on the grill doors; others had the stock first aid kit - a lemon, coconut husk, chillies and alum; some had half lemon slices liberally sprinkled with rock salt to absorb any slimy viruses. Turmeric water at doorways and buckets or pots of water being replenished everyday as DIY sanitiser that also respects the wisdom of our ancestors.

By the second week of curfew, I and a companion, my 76 year old aunt join me. We all had muted Lunar New Year celebrations as we adjusted to restrictions and rules of

lockdown. Weekly forays to vegetable and fruit stalls and the supermarket armed with list of requirements from senior citizens and families with little children became a routine. Since only one person per household was allowed to leave the complex and several retired senior Railway employees live here , my nephew and I became the de facto shoppers for the 2 blocks we lived in. Stops had to be planned ahead since we had to factor in the long queues.

Our neighbourhood tailor Mr. Muruganandham decided to stitch and give away free masks. I collected blouse bits, and left over material, nada (string) and elastic rolls for ties and handed it over to him. These masks were then provided to anyone who was required to serve our community- the maids and housekeeping staff and security personnel – around 100 in all. And we enthusiastically lit Diyas as requested by our Prime Minister and also because it gave us something to look forward in such restrictive times.

I also decided to make a difference of my own. My sister, aunt and I took turns to supply all the helpers in the complex coffee/tea, lime juice or buttermilk every day as they came in to clean our surroundings, help in our households and regularly took interest in our well being. I also ensured that my maid Devi (and her family of 6), the security personnel (5 men) and the housekeeping staff (5 women) had provisions of rice, oil, pulses and sugar, salt etc for three months.

When the lockdown 2.0 was announced and the virus kept coming closer and spread wider, we stopped all households and began to allot jobs such as milk distribution, groceries shopping and procuring vegetables and eggs etc. on a rotation basis. Also, we take turns feeding and quenching the thirst of the families of dogs and pigeons and crows in our compound

Apart from this, we kept having motivational activities such as walking in the park and terrace schedules, assigning sunbathing timings and spots, chanting and bhajan singing at the temple and yoga sessions for the senior citizens and karate lessons for kids who needed to release pent up energy - with distancing observed of course.

As Lockdown 3.0 was announced, we began sharing passwords for our Netflix and Amazon prime accounts to make life bearable for many of our fellow 'lockdownees'. With barely anything other than COVID news, we also formed Whatsapp groups to share recipes to for immunity building kashayams using turmeric, neem, thoothuvalai, tulsi (basil), pepper, ginger, garlic, karpuravalli (Mexican mint), and lemon, reviving recipes from our mother's kitchens, suggestions for inhalations that help clear breathing passages, motivational messages to reassure that we are there to help each other and give updates on shopping schedules, timings for disinfectant sprays and testing and availability of essentials at the gate.

For me, this was a time to explore the online academic forays with webinars with

colleagues from New York, and Hyderabad on Storytelling in a post-Covid cinematic world hosted by edX Napier Bridge and attending a few webinars on Media's role during a Pandemic and a Storytelling workshop, of course take up new activities – maintaining a Lockdown Diary on Facebook, participating in several Instagram live chat sessions on dance, Indian politics, keeping your sanity during such extended lockdowns. As recently as this week, I enrolled for a class in classical dance form, Odissi. I also conduct online yoga sessions for IT professionals who are coping with inactivity during the work from home routine and online lectures for Anna University Media Sciences department.

With my own family of 4 living in 3 different continents, I insisted on a weekly video-call a mandatory routine as also daily sharing of cooking tips, menus, and morning and night greetings just so we feel connected even if it means one of us is sleepy or just woken up considering the time differences

As I near 60 days of staying at home, and Lockdown India 4.0 is anticipated, what keeps me positive and functioning?

- Keeping a routine that includes physical, mental, psychological and emotional well being of others and myself.
- Maintaining a diet to boost immunity using traditional and medical sound advice equally
- Connecting with friends, neighbours and family every day to schedule to help in

community initiatives

- Allotting myself writing and reading assignments
- Appreciating and acknowledging the ones who help us everyday
- Making family video calls mandatory – once a week
- Restricting TV and Social media time to rest the eyes and ensure good sleep
- Keeping myself informed and teaching others to sift fake and alarmist news from genuine and credible information
- Ensuring some me time every day with coffee, crosswords and cooking
- Looking for the best in everyone and every situation.

I am preparing myself and others to live with this virus and with as little as possible.

And I sign off with my favourite recipe for a good night's sleep - warm turmeric milk with a sprinkling of pepper and a drop of honey.

